Dying the Human Condition: Re-reading Ivan Ilyich with Levinas[1]

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1. The argument

This essay consists in a reading of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* from the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical metaphysics. The motive is two-fold. First, Ivan Ilyich's encounter with death is exemplary of what happens in the face of the Other/death in Levinas. For Levinas, our encounter with death can be likened to the face-to-face encounter with the other person, the very incarnation of alterity as such. Face to face with his own imminent demise, death as something we only ever contemplate in the abstract as remote future possibility becomes Ivan Ilyich's inevitable present reality. As we know, death puts things into perspective for Ivan Ilyich. It invalidates his egotistical worldly pursuits as not being "the real thing" and facilitates a moment of insight, which frees him from his fear of death and brings peace and acceptance. In Tolstoy's novella, as in Levinas, there is always time to recover meaning in the face of death.

Reading Tolstoy's novella from a Levinasian perspective is not merely interesting because the former is illustrative of the latter, however. Paradoxically a Levinasian reading also serves to partially challenge and augment the standard interpretation that appreciates the purport of Tolstoy's tale as a disavowal of earthly enjoyment for the sake of heavenly salvation. For as we shall see, instead of negating "economic life" as "not the real thing" – a view more often than not associated with Levinas's position – he also argues in favour of the ethical necessity of our egoist exploits in the world. In short, I cannot be a self claimed by the Other (death) if I do not enjoy the world. Death does not authenticate an otherwise worthless existence; death is not authentication but annihilation. And yet, because of the event that happens in death, the self, that kernel of immanence, which up until now was self-supporting and autonomous, is *preserved* in transcendence. It is now heteronomously reoriented, becoming other-to-itself without – miraculously – losing itself [1]. This "second birth" is what Levinas describes in *Le temps et l'autre* as "vanquishing death."

There is a thus a double movement present in Levinas's thinking. Like in Ivan Ilyich's case, encountering the Other/death urges another orientation upon my

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egotistical gravitation. Apart from a critique of my self-serving "economic" exploits, it is also a recognition of the ethical significance and necessity of the pursuit and satisfaction of my needs. Taking care of myself and my needs is necessarily associated with the fulfilment of my obligations because I cannot help the other in need without having bread and shelter to give. That which Ivan Ilyich comes to regret in the face of death – his entire earthly life with its mundane ambitions and projects, which he comes to see as not "the real thing" – is precisely what Levinas recognizes as the necessary condition for the real thing.

2. The death of Ivan Ilyich

Death in the abstract has no meaning, no bearing on me. Death is always someone else's death. Death only comes into being for me as my own death. Tolstoy, unlike the main character of his 1886 novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich,* was preoccupied with death his entire life. He had witnessed death numerous times and had studied it meticulously both physically and metaphysically. Ivan Ilyich, an ambitious and opportunistic middle-aged judge, on the other hand, was busy seizing the day. His own mortality never concerned him until one fateful day when a trivial domestic accident brought him to death's door. Bumping himself slightly while hanging up draperies was quite literally the death of him. The fact that such a trifling incident could spell annihilation seemed as unjust as it was absurd to the judge. While death was of no consequence to him before, his own slow and painful dissolution had now become his sole preoccupation. And so the tale unfolds of death as lived by the dying. Ivan Ilyich desperately struggled against the inevitability of his own demise. When he finally realized that he was lost, that death was upon him, "that the end had come, the very end", words failed him. He began three days of incessant screaming. And then something unexpected happened. At the very moment that his son crept into the room to console the dying man, "Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it should have but that he could still rectify the situation." With that realization the pain, fear and even death itself disappeared. He drew in a final breath and died thinking, "death is over… there is no more death" [2].

Tolstoy's account of the judge's life is charged with blatant accusation. "What did you do with this divine asset, Life? demands Tolstoy…. Your life has been 'most simple and commonplace – and most horrifying'". The bleak indictment continues to include every aspect of Ivan Ilyich's character as well as his personal and professional conduct and then, astonishingly, the reader finds him/herself identifying with this unremarkable man, even to like and pity him when he starts to lose out to death [3]. In sympathizing with the judge, we are sympathizing with ourselves and all the little hopes and aspirations that our worldly projects afford us. As Levinas explains, our being-in-the-world is precisely defined by our relations to objects and projects across a distance. It is what draws us out of ourselves, momentarily alleviating our existential burden, the unbearable heaviness of being.

3. The present and the future in Levinas

Levinas's ethical metaphysics is both concerned with our present life in-the-world *and* with the future beyond-this-world, with immanence and transcendence, with the self and the other person. His early phenomenological analyses, which proceed descriptively to uncover the essence of a matter, focus on the present, on our life in-the-world, on immanence. Given his mature works' prioritzation of the Other, the self's existential exploits in the world are more often than not interpreted as ontologically inferior or ethically inessential to the future, to transcendence. However, Levinas's thinking cannot simplistically be reduced to a binary opposition between immanence and transcendence. For him, the promise of the future is a promise of resurrecting the past, but in such a way that it would begin anew. The happiness of a new beginning that the future can bring, a renewal of one's being, is the paradoxical happiness of the *felix culpa*. More than the loss of immanence and self, which could be interpreted as a fortunate fall because of the good that comes from it, it is the preservation of immanence in transcendence. For Levinas, the "first" beginning in the now, the instant of immanence, is the very condition for the possibility of a second beginning, a "new birth" [4]. Our life in-the-world is more than just a miserable series of events that will eventually lead to a happier outcome. The movement that leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being: an *ex-cendence*. As Levinas explains, this excendence and the Good necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why Being is better than non-being [5]. A being is the very condition for the possibility of escaping Being.

Levinas thus radically redefines the ancient sense of time understood as an infinite succession of instants. According to his existential interpretation of time, an instant is indeed a commencement. This present is the awakening of consciousness, an *Augenblick*. The future is not to be understood as the recurrence of the now or its continuation. Rather, the future is the possibility of another instant or beginning, another chance for the now. The event that the future brings is a chance to recommence otherwise. This is the sense of time not as a determinate infinity of instants, but rather of the *infinition,* the ever recommencing of the definitive (cf. EE, 14 [Lingis's introduction]).

4. Being-in-the-world: the horizontal transcendence of light

Levinas's thought begins with the origination of the distinct existent: impersonal Being hypostasizes in a being. He then moves onto the progressively more intricate constitutive strata of subjectivity, its materiality and solitude, its insertion in and life in the world, its suffering and death, to conclude with subject's encounter with the other person. It is this encounter that introduces the future into the present.

According to his early ontological analyses, our "economic" existence, our being-in-the-world, is defined by our relations to objects and projects across a distance. It is what draws us out of ourselves, momentarily alleviating our

existential burden. For Levinas, our worldly exploits serve to assuage the unbearable heaviness of being. The world offers deliverance through objects, projects and nourishments. "The morality of 'early nourishments' is the first morality", writes Levinas, "the first abnegation. It is not the last, but *one must past through it*" (TA, 64/156, my emphasis). Our worldly encounter with provisional alterity therefore serves as *necessary* forerunner of the encounter with absolute alterity.

Being-in-the-world is a paradoxical experience. It is characterized by the confluence of pleasure and pain, of *jouissance* and suffering. The existent finds itself mired in the unbearably heaviness of solitude and materiality, while enjoying the opportunities offered by the world to escape the gravity of existence. Life might be hard, but according to Levinas it is good to be alive. Subjectivity, nevertheless, does not belong to the world. Being-in-the-world does not define our existence. Rather, subjectivity takes form in its withdrawal from the world and maintains a distance from objects possessed in the world.

This possession at a distance is what constitutes the intentionality of intentions. Through intentions our presence in the world is across a distance. Existence itself affords no distance but weighs upon us. The intentional nature of our relationship to the world, on the other hand, leaves the I some freedom with regard to it and therefore offers a welcome reprieve (EE, 47/73).

Levinas explains intentionality as the origin of sense. Sense is apperception — the process by which a person makes sense of something by assimilating it to the body of ideas s/he already possesses. That which belongs to the external world is attuned to our internal conceptual framework. Intentionality is an outward movement of illumination emanating from the self and going towards the other thereby constituting that other by assimilating its alterity. Light or luminosity makes sensible or intellectual apperception possible – it is the very condition for meaning (EE, 48/75-76; TA, 64/157). In other words, in our necessarily subjective perception of the world the foreign character of new objects is mediated through the intervention of light and consciousness. We never encounter the exteriority of a thing in itself: objective signification or "exteriority" refers to inwardness. So while worldly objects succeed in drawing us out of ourselves, it only ever amounts to a partial alleviation of our existential burden. There is a move towards objects but always a return, because comprehension, which gives us access to objects in the world, emanates from within the existent.

For Levinas, materiality is not the imprisonment of the spirit in the body. Rather, materiality is an ontological event, the concrete event of the relationship between Ego [*Moi*] and Self [*Soi*] (TA, 56-57/148). Existence is material; to be is to be bogged down in oneself. While existence is a pressing weight, being-in-the-world affords the opportunity to reach for objects. Our everyday life is therefore a partial way of being free from the initial materiality through which a subject is accomplished [*s'accomplit*] (TA, 63-64/155-156).

The Levinasian subject nevertheless does not experience the world primarily as a utilitarian realm. To be sure, our relation to the world is indeed useful therein that it fulfils our needs, and beneficial therein that it partially alleviates our

stifling solitude resulting from our being mired in an unbearably heavy materiality. However, for Levinas, the world is not first and foremost an ensemble of Heideggerian tools ready-to-hand, but rather an ensemble of *nourishments* (TA, 63/155) [6]. For Heidegger, the use of tools, our practice in the world is part of the closed circle ultimately referring to our deepest existential destiny, to our very care [*Sorge*] for existing [7]. For Levinas, objects in the world have nothing to do with this ultimate reflexivity (TA, 63/155). The uttermost finality of eating is contained in food. It is indeed an ecstatic existence — being outside of oneself by going toward an object in the world — but limited by that object. There is no existential destiny hidden behind the act — we eat for the sake of eating, not to authenticate our existence, but because we are hungry, and to satisfy our appetite is pleasurable. For Levinas, sensibility and sentience form the principle of the subject's individuation. It starts with the very basic capability of hunger and the enjoyment of eating (cf. TI, 59/30). In fact, Levinas characterizes our relationship with objects as a primordial experience of enjoyment [*jouissance*].

Enjoyment does not, however, break the irremissible material attachment of the ego to the self. Things (being-towards-objects) do not have the redemptive power we need to escape ourselves. The transcendence afforded by our worldly projects is wrapped in immanence (TA, 64-65/156-157). It might offer temporary alleviation, but it is never a complete escape from our material burden (TA, 66/159). Something absolutely strange is needed to truly get free from ourselves. This realization that our being-in-the-world – the things and projects that constitute the world of the living – is not enough is embodied in Ivan Ilyich's stark realization towards the end of Tolstoy's novella: "What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, simply was *not the real thing*?". He realized that "[h]is official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people in society and in his profession – all these might not have been the real thing. He tried to come up with a defense of these things and suddenly became aware of the insubstantiality of them all. And there was nothing left to defend" (pp. 126-127).

It is at this point that Levinas shifts the emphasis away from the question of the self-transcendence of the existent which dominates his earliest three works to an unfathomable and mysterious Other — an Other as enigmatic as death itself (TI, 234/211). In face of the Other/death, the subject is no longer actively self-transformative and –transcending, but reduced to a "bottomless" or "deathlike passivity" (AE, 111/141; 124/159).

Suffering and death announce the absolute strangeness of a future ever future. Death is always yet to come, and in its inevitable approach we are confronted with something that we cannot assimilate, not in life. Death is truly remaining in the beyond, since no one has returned from it. As such, it is an event that can be compared to the (ethical) encounter with the other person — that which will redeem us from our materiality and change our egoist nature never to return to ourselves as we were. It is an event so mysterious that, for Levinas, nothing is more like it than death!

5. Death as the end of mastery

We have seen that, for Levinas, the existential condition is not a *stasis* (literally meaning "to be or "to stand") — it is not a state of equilibrium or inactivity. Rather it is a condition of *ecstasis* ("to be at") or to stand towards something that creates some distance between the self and itself through an involvement in the world. This is the duality of solitude. The existent thus appears as a *diastasis*, as a being standing apart from itself. This makes for the fundamental paradox characterizing the existential condition: since the existent does not fully coincide with itself, it reaches towards the world in an effort to establish a sense of equilibrium. The fact that it is materially mired in itself, at the same time forces it to go beyond itself in an effort to establish some distance between the ego and self. It thus, simultaneously, attempts to fill a lack and create a gap within itself. The harder we try to establish some sense of existential equilibrium by our involvement in the world — we eat, we inhabit, we labour and possess in an attempt to feel less dislocated from ourselves — the more we become aware of our unbearable materiality that cannot be surmounted by our increasingly impotent projects in the world. By trying to fill the lack within we become increasingly aware of the need instead for some distance from ourselves.

Levinas maintains that in physical pain one's engagement in existence is without equivocation – it becomes impossible to detach oneself from being (TA, 69/163; TI, 238-239/215-216). It is the suffering Ivan Ilyich finding himself "backed up to being" – being without nothingness (TI, 238/215). Along with the impossibility of nothingness, there is in suffering the proximity of death. The unknown of death signifies that the subject finds itself in relationship with what is refractory to light, with mystery. In the face of death, the subject finds itself seized, overwhelmed and utterly passive. For Heidegger, being-toward-death signals authentic existence, and hence, the very virility of the subject. It is *Dasein's* assumption of the uttermost possibilities of existence, which precisely makes possible all other possibilities. For Heidegger, death is an event of freedom, the "*possibility* of impossibility". For Levinas, on the other hand, death signals "the impossibility of possibility" (TA, 70-71/165; TI, 235/212). Death seizes us while stripping us of our ability to have powers – our power to be able [*nous ne 'pouvons plus pouvoir'*] (TA, 74/170). The other [*l'Autre*], announced in death, alienates not only my abilities and possibilities but my very being (TA, 75/171).

What is conjured in Levinas's lengthy descriptions of suffering and death is not only the alterity of death, but also the alterity of the other person. What is common to death and social life is an encounter with radical alterity, with a Mystery. In fact, for Levinas, the encounter with the alterity of death is like nothing so much as the encounter with the alterity of the other person, "as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relationship with the Other" (TI, 234/211). And if the Other is truly like death, it seems probable that the encounter with the Other will lead to the de-subjectivation or dissolution of the subject — the "end of mastery" (TA, 74/170), stripped of all semblance of initiative or agency.

Death is a mystery precisely because it is never present: "[i]f you are, it is not; if it is, you are not" [8]. According to Levinas, this ancient adage testifies to the eternal futurity of death. Our relationship with death is a unique relationship with the future. The fact that it deserts every present is not due to our evasion of death, but to the fact that death is *ungraspable*, that it marks the end of the subject's virility and heroism. The now is the fact that I am master, master of grasping the possible. Death is never now (TA, 71/167).

To die is to return to the state of irresponsibility, "the simple way out of all the little brick dead ends we scratch our nails against […] where the burden, the terrifying hellish weight of self-responsibility…is lifted" [9]. It marks a reversal of the subject's activity into passivity — Macbeth's passivity when there is no longer hope, when he is finally confronted with Macduff, the man not of woman born, the one, according to the witches' prediction, who will bring him to his end: "I'll not fight with thee" (TA, 73/168). However, prior to death there is always a last chance; this is what heroes such as Macbeth seize: "…yet I will try the last" [10]. Death cannot be seized, it comes. Nothingness is impossible. Hamlet's words, "to be or not to be", is not the question par excellence, Levinas insists, for in reality we have no choice but to be. Being is not accompanied by nothingness, as Sartre thought; being is irremissible. It is nothingness that would have left humankind the possibility of assuming death and escaping from its material servitude (TA, 73/169).

The relationship with the other is thus a mystery that cannot be assumed, but that alienates. But if death is the alienation of my existence, is it still my death? How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other? How can an existent as mortal persevere in its mastery?

4. The future of death: transcending the horizontal transcendence of the world

According to Levinas, "only a being whose solitude has reached a crispation through suffering, and in relation with death, takes its place on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible" (TA, 76/171). Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich was such a being, whom, an hour before his death, through the other, his son, could finally face the other (death). An hour before Ivan Ilyich's death, his son crept into his room:

> "[t]he dying man was still screaming desperately and flailing his arms. One hand fell on the boy's head. The boy grasped it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. At that very moment Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light… it became clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him suddenly was vanishing at once — from two sides, ten sides, all sides….'And death? Where is it?' He searched for the accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death. Instead of death there was light" (pp. 132-133).

At that moment, after a long drawn out suffering and a desperate struggle against death, Ivan Ilyich's solitude reached a crispation through which a relationship with the other became possible. For him, at that moment death was over, there was no more death.

Does this imply that it is indeed possible to enter into a relationship with the other without being annihilated by the other? After all, for Ivan Ilyich there might not have been any more death, but after he had this epiphany, he still drew in a last breath, broke off in the middle of it, and died (p. 134). This is what Levinas calls the problem of *the preservation of the ego in transcendence*. If the escape from solitude is meant to be something other than the absorption of the ego in the term towards which it is projected, and if, on the other hand, the subject cannot assume death as it assumes an object, how can this reconciliation between the ego and death come about (TA, 78/174)? If one is no longer able to be able, how can one still remain a self in the face of death? The pathos of suffering consists in the impossibility of fleeing existence, but also in the terror of leaving this earthly existence. This is why Ivan Ilyich "struggled as a man condemned to death struggles in the hands of an executioner, knowing there is no escape. And he felt that with every minute, despite his efforts to resist, he was coming closer and closer to what terrified him." He realized that he was lost, that there was no return, that the end had come, the very end, and he began shouting: "I don't want it! I don't!" (p. 131). Three days of incessant screaming followed. It was Ivan Ilyich sounding his own death knell, a piercing noise in defiance of his own mortality and reminding us of our own.

This is the very reversal of the subject's activity into passivity, "the crying and sobbing toward which suffering is inverted. Where suffering attains its purity, where there is no longer anything between us and it, the supreme responsibility of this extreme assumption turns into supreme irresponsibility, into infancy. Sobbing is this, and precisely through this it announces death. To die is to return to the state of irresponsibility, to the infantile shaking of sobbing" (TA, 72/167). This is what Levinas refers to when he writes: "the face-to-face with the Other… is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in this regard, but where nonetheless… it is in front of the subject" (TA, 78-79/175).

Like Hamlet we prefer known existence to the unknown of death. It is as if existence itself offers the only possible refuge against what is unbearable in existence. We want both to be and to die, to escape irremissible responsibility and suffering through nothingness. In allowing death to be welcomed, as Ivan Ilyich is finally able to do, the ego retains — in the face of death — the freedom acquired by hypostasis. This is what Levinas calls the attempt to vanquish death, i.e. facing up to death without welcoming it as one would welcome an object. Vanquishing death is then not a problem of eternal life, but rather to maintain, with the alterity of the event, a relationship that must still be personal.

The subject is able to face up to that event precisely because of the independence and separation acquired through its economic exploits in the world. The generosity of the subject going towards the Other, breaking forth from the exclusive property of egoist enjoyment, is premised on that very independence, on the riches acquired. Because the subject has something to give, a personal relationship with the Other can be established (TI, 76/48). "This is why", writes Levinas, "the life between birth and death is neither folly nor absurdity nor flight

nor cowardice. It flows on in a dimension of its own where it has meaning, and where a triumph over death can have meaning" (TI, 56/27). That which Ivan Ilyich regrets – his entire earthly life with its mundane ambitions and projects, which he comes to disavow as not being the real thing – is precisely what Levinas recognizes as the necessary condition for the real thing. Because encountering death is also encountering the other person, death acquires another signification in Levinas. It is not that which renders my "economic" earthly existence inferior to the hereafter, transcendence or the ethical life. It is an encounter with the other person in need that not only appeals to me for aid but also relies on my ability to be able to help, to have something to give, a home to offer. This encounter, therefore, not only questions my egotistical selfish life and nature but also relies on the riches so accumulated, which renders this economic life a necessary condition for the ethical life. Giving is what gives meaning to having.

What Tolstoy's narrative illustrates and what Levinas reiterates later in *Totalité et infini*, is that when the egoist will is confronted with death, but a death ever future, it has time for the Other, and thus to recover meaning despite death (TI, 281/257). In life, we still have time; in death, the distance created by time is reduced to nothing. In the face of imminent death, in his hour of supreme suffering, Ivan Ilyich endured the inescapable pain without being overwhelmed by it. This situation where consciousness is deprived of all freedom of movement, and yet maintains a minimal distance from the present — this ultimate passivity, which nonetheless desperately turns into action and into hope – Levinas calls *patience*. In patience a disengagement within engagement is effected. Death, that has a hold on me, is not yet upon me; it continues to threaten from the impending future. In this extreme consciousness, where death no longer touches me extreme passivity becomes extreme mastery (TI, 238-239/216-217).

Levinas thus postulates the possibility of an event in death, an event in no way anticipated or initiated by the subject (TA, 75-77/171-173). On the brink of this mystery that is death, in the face of imminent destruction, another possibility opens: a second beginning, "a new birth" (TA, 81/179). But how is it possible to begin anew in the face of complete obliteration? What is the tie between two instants that have between them the whole abyss that separates the present and death, this margin at once both insignificant and infinite, where there is always room enough for hope? For Ivan Ilyich, the chasm between the present and the future is bridged by his son, i.e. through fecundity.

7. Fecundity: the future of death explained

The future that death gives is not yet time. In order for this future to become an element of time, it must enter into a relationship with the present. This presence of the future in the present is not the feat of the subject alone, however. Time is accomplished in face of another, in the relation between humans (TA, 79/176). To understand this, one must realize that for Levinas the future is not buried in the bowels of a pre-existent eternity, where we would – with the passing of the present instant – come to lay hold of it. No, "[m]ore than the renewal of our moods and qualities, time is essentially a *new birth* (TA, 81/179, my emphasis).

Unlike Hannah Arendt's celebrated notion of a "second birth" [11], however, the strangeness of the future of death does not leave the subject any initiative – the ego is absolutely passive in the face of death. And yet, this event consists in vanquishing death, which is not a question of eternal life but nevertheless a transcendence of mortality. Vanquishing death, as we have seen, consists in maintaining, with the alterity of the event, a relationship that must still be personal.

What, then, is this personal relationship other than the subject's power and initiative? Is there another mastery in the human other than the virility of grasping the possible, the *power to be able* [*pouvoir de pouvoir*]? If any mastery is to be found in passivity it would be the very embodiment of time. Time is the relation with the Other (TA, 81-812/180).

For Levinas, "victory over death" constitutes that horizon where a personal life can be constituted in the heart of the transcendent event (TA, 90/191). Herewith he is searching for a situation in which the I bears itself beyond death and recovers also from its return to itself (TI, 253/231). It would be a situation in which the ego becomes other to itself in the face of alterity without being absorbed in that alterity (TA, 91/191). It would be a renewal without loss, a new birth without death. This, according to Levinas, becomes possible only through paternity.

Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, while being entirely Other, is myself. My child is a stranger, but a stranger who is not only mine, for s/he *is* me. This alteration and identification in fecundity constitutes paternity. In the I – through the child – being can be produced as infinitely recommencing, that is, as infinite (TI, 271-272/249-250). Infinite being cannot bypass subjectivity, for it cannot recommence without it. The I recommences infinitely by going towards a future without breaking with its origin in the I. It does not break with its origin but it also does not return entirely – to old age and death. In this way, Levinas establishes fecundity as an ontological category.

Fecundity introduces a multiplicity and a transcendence *in* existence. The I is not swept away in transcendence, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. If the I were swept away it would fail to transcend itself. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence. By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is, in the child, an other. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification – a structure unforeseeable in formal logic (TI, 277/254).

Up until now the I was stuck in the relentless but useless loop of reiteration: time and time again returning to find that I am still the same, still riveted to myself. Like the diverse forms assumed by Proteus, the I fails to liberate itself from its identity. In fecundity the tedium of this repetition ceases; the I is other and young, yet somehow retained in this very renouncement of self. Fecundity continues history without producing old age. Infinite time does not bring eternal life to an aging subject, but is made possible by the discontinuity of generations – the inexhaustible youth of the next generation.

6. Conclusion: a yes-saying to happiness **and** *goodness*

The Levinasian reading of *Ivan Ilyich* as set out in this essay is an attempt to achieve two aims at once. First, it employs Tolstoy's novella to unlock the notoriously difficult dynamics at play in Levinas's ethical metaphysics. Levinas conceptualizes the event that happens in the face of imminent death/Other in terms of a turning point in which my egoist orientation is converted towards goodness – towards the needs of others. This is what happened to Ivan Ilyich just before he died: one minute the dying man was still screaming desperately in defiance of his own imminent demise. The next he became aware of his son kissing his hand and he had a startling revelation: his life had not been what it should have but there is still time to rectify it… "But what *is* the real thing? … He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He grieved for him. His wife came in and went up to him. He looked at her… He grieved for her. 'Yes, I'm torturing them,' he thought. 'They feel sorry for me, but it will be better for them when I die'" (pp. 132-133). Levinas would say that Ivan Ilyich's egoist capacities were "reconditioned", "put into question", such that he became *first* for-the-other *before* the very firstness of his being for-himself. His own fate, his certain death was no longer as important as the happiness of his family. The strategic presence and instrumental role of his son in these final moments enabled him to vanquish death for in the end Ivan Ilyich might have drawn in his last breath and died but for him "there was no more death". He lives on in his son as we all do in our children.

That does not exhaust the insights gained from a Levinasian reading, however. Contrary to a common misconception, Levinas's position does not amount to the straightforward dismissal of "economic life" as "not the real thing". Levinas's early works fervently defend the ethical necessity of our egoist exploits in the world. As Peperzak points out, no philosopher can be satisfied with the duality of two unrelated dimensions that comes to the fore if happiness (economic life) and goodness (ethical life) remained forever separated and even partly opposed. Even for Kant that would be contrary to the necessary presuppositions and demands of reasons [12]. Levinas maintains that the satisfaction of human needs is necessarily associated with the fulfilment of our obligations because I cannot help the other in need without something to give. The ability to offer food and shelter to others is dependent upon one's self-sufficiency because only the one who can take care of him/herself is able to take up his/her responsibility towards others (TI, 215/190). In short, economic life here and now cannot be dismissed in favour of the ethical life or a better hereafter because that would amount to the separation of happiness and goodness, which in turn would be unreasonable. It would be unreasonable and immoral, according to Kant, because it would mean that it is physically impossible to do what we are morally obligated to do. Applied to Ivan Ilyich this would mean that his revelation and "ethical reorientation" occurred not despite his egotistical life and nature but also *because* of it.

Ultimately then, what we find in Levinas is a Yes-saying to time and death. This affirmation does not disavow life and the past in favour of the future. It is an affirmation that becomes possible because of life – life as a resurrection of the

past pardoned. Concrete economic life enables me to be for death not in anticipation and anxiety but in patience. “To be *for* a time that would be without me, *for* a time after my time” is to affirm – without ressentiment – “the passage to the time of the other” [13]. It is to acknowledge, as Nietzsche does, that “some are born posthumously” [14].

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[2] Tolstoy, L. (1981). *The Death of Ivan Ilyich,* trans. Lynn Solotaroff. London: Bantam Books, pp. 132-134; hereafter cited as Tolstoy.

[3] See Ronald Blythe's "Introduction" to Tolstoy's novella, p. 16.

[4] Levinas E. (1987). *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. In French: *Le temps et l' autre*. (1948). Grenoble & Paris: B. Arthaud, p. 81/179; hereafter abbreviated as TA with the original French following the English translation page references.

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[7] On the referral from tool use to *Dasein,* see Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*, trans. J. Maquarrie & E. Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 116-117.

[8] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in TA, 71/167.

[9] Plath, S. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, transcribed from the original manuscripts at Smith College, ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, pp. 149, 150.

[10] "*Spiro/spero"* literally meaning "[i]f I breathe, I hope." (TA, 73/169).

[11] Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 176-177.

[12] See Adriaan Peperzak's "Some Remarks on Hegel, Kant and Levinas, in Cohen, R. A. (Ed.)(1986). *Face to Face with Levinas*. Albany, New York: Suny Press, pp. 205-218.

[13] Levinas, E. (1993). *Collected Philosophical Papers,* trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 92.

[14] Cf. Kantor, A. (1996). "Time of Ethics. Levinas and the *Éclectement* of Time", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* 22(6): 42-43.